

**IDITAROD NEWS**

RACE NEWS  
2005 PHOTOS  
INTERACTIVE

**RACE GUIDE**

HALL OF FAME  
RACE MAPS  
MUSHING GEAR

**RACE HISTORY**

2004 RACE NEWS  
2004 PHOTOS  
2003 RACE NEWS  
2003 PHOTOS  
2002 RACE NEWS  
2002 PHOTOS  
2001 RACE NEWS  
2001 PHOTOS  
2000 RACE NEWS  
2000 PHOTOS  
1999 RACE NEWS  
1998 RACE NEWS  
25TH SPECIAL

**Iditarod E-mail**

Get adn.com's  
Iditarod headlines  
sent free to you daily  
via e-mail.

E-mail address:

Sign up

## Mushing: Egil's in rare air

### Musher sprints to fourth Rondy crown

By **KEVIN KLOTT**  
**Anchorage Daily News**

February 28, 2005

Just name the sport, and you'll find great athletes defined by moments in which rivals pushed them to new heights.

Muhammad Ali had Joe Frazier in boxing, Larry Bird had Magic Johnson in basketball, and Alex Rodriguez has the Boston Red Sox in baseball.

And on a brilliant Sunday afternoon in Anchorage, Egil Ellis had Rudi Ropertz in the final heat of the Fur Rendezvous Open World Championship Sled Dog Race. The 34-year-old Swede, now a Willow resident, beat his German rival by more than four minutes to win his fourth Fur Rondy in five tries.

"If he (Ropertz) hadn't been in the race, I wouldn't have had the pressure on me to win," Ellis said. "Couple that with the sickness (some dogs were ill Friday) and we made the race pretty interesting."

After Friday's first heat, Ellis' team stood third, trailing Salcha's Eric Lanser by more than a minute. His dogs battled intestinal viruses all weekend, and the Willow musher didn't know if they had the strength to make up the lost time.

"It doesn't look like we'll be able to win with the way we're looking now," Ellis said after Friday's race. "We'll have to wait until next year."

But next year quickly became this year when an out-of-breath Ellis passed the famous bronze Balto statue on the corner of Fourth Avenue and D Street and crossed the finish line spread-eagled in joy. He landed safely on his runners, pumped his fists and laughed while his canine crew loped into a sea of handlers.

"I finally picked the right 10," Ellis said about his team of German short-haired pointers. "It was a little bit of luck too."

Throughout three days and 75 miles of sprint racing, Ellis' 10-dog team finished first in 4 hours, 29 minutes, more than five minutes faster than Ropertz's 12-dog team.

"Egil -- best in the world," Ropertz said in broken English. "Too good for me today."

The 63-year-old retired businessman, who flew to Alaska from Germany in January just to race dogs this winter, finished second in 4:34:38. Ropertz used to compete against Ellis in Europe, he said, and they soon became the best-known sprint mushers on the continent.

Meanwhile, Lanser, 32, placed third and Manley's Joee Redington Jr. placed fourth -- the same finishes they posted last year when Canada's Blayne Streeper won.

"There's no other sprint race like this in the world," Redington said. "Whether it's running over bridges,



Heading back toward downtown after completing a loop at Campbell airstrip, Egil Ellis charges up the approach to the Tudor Road overpass on his run to the finish line Sunday. Ellis torched the field, winning his fourth Fur Rendezvous World Championship Sled Dog Race.

(Photo by Jim Lavrakas / Anchorage Daily News)



Four-time world champion Egil Ellis accepts the congratulations of spectators after he completed his run in the Fur Rendezvous World Championship Sled Dog Race on Sunday.

(Photo by Jim Lavrakas / Anchorage Daily News)

going under culverts or meeting crowds, it's a great feeling to know you did well."

Ellis held a 1:24 lead before Sunday's start and needed a flawless run to secure the historic victory. He did just that.

By gaining his fourth world championship in five tries, Ellis moved into a tie with Salcha's Charlie Champaine for third on the all-time wins list.

The only mushers with more Fur Rondy championships are George Attla, known as the "Huslia Hustler," with 10 and the now-deceased Dr. Roland Lombard of Wayland, Mass., with eight.

"I'm honored to be in that group," Ellis said. "I know how hard it is just to do it once. And to do it back-to-back and then repeat it again? That takes a lot of hard work and dedication."

Ellis and his wife, Helen Lundberg, who won the Women's Open World Championship Sled Dog Race last year, moved to Alaska in 1998 after dominating the European mushing scene.

Seven years later, Ellis is still learning about dogs and still claiming that Fur Rondy is one of the toughest sled dog races in the world.

He proved that in Sunday's reverse-order start, in which the last-place musher took off first. Because of that, more passes take place than any other day of Rondy.

"I learned a lot this weekend by running sick dogs," Ellis said. "You could see it in their eyes. But it didn't show until we were out there racing."

Ellis' goal was to let Ropertz set the pace and just tag along behind. But plans changed once Ropertz tangled with two other teams.

On the portion of the trail that parallels Tudor Road, Ellis was delayed nearly a minute when he approached the three-team jam.

Ellis had no choice but to stop. The trail was blocked with scrambled dogs. Ellis couldn't see his way through, but his leaders could.

Ropertz's team yielded to the right and Ellis' leaders -- Dollar and Tina -- put on a show of pure athleticism by threading the needle.

"They wanted to go, so I just let them go," Ellis said. "We went slalom between three teams and passed them right away."

"It was one of those great moments you remember forever," Ellis said. "After that, I was in heaven."

But even before Ropertz's heaven-sent move gave Ellis a boost, he unknowingly gave Lanser a helping hand just seconds from the start line.

Lanser's lead dogs Chanel and Koa didn't like the feel of slushy snow beneath their feet, Lanser said, and Fourth Avenue was nothing but slush. As Chanel and Koa approached Fourth Avenue and A Street, they decided road mushing wasn't their style.

"It was warm, and they just didn't like the loose snow on the street," Lanser said. "So they headed to the sidewalk instead."

"It was a stressful deal."



Eric Lanser kicks his way into the finish, holding off Bill Kornmuller after he passed Kornmuller and Joee Redington, Jr., earlier in Sunday's run. Lanser, the first-day leader, finished third overall.

(Photo by Jim Lavrakas / Anchorage Daily News)



Rudi Ropertz does some deep breathing before the start of his run in the Fur Rendezvous World Championship Sled Dog Race on Sunday. Ropertz, who came to Alaska from Germany for Fur Rondy, finished second overall to Egil Ellis.

(Photo by Jim Lavrakas / Anchorage Daily News)

[Click on photo to enlarge](#)



Especially once the Anchorage Police Department got involved. The lead dogs climbed a snow berm in search of better snow when an officer pulled them back to Fourth Avenue.

Meanwhile, Ropertz, who started two minutes behind Lanser, was approaching quickly. A crash seemed inevitable.

But Ropertz's canines hawed, barely avoiding a catastrophe. And Lanser's team gave chase, putting him back in the 25-mile race.

From then on, the race and the \$7,800 top prize belonged to Ellis.

"That moment was enough excitement for us," Lanser said. "That's Rendezvous."

Daily News reporter Kevin Klott can be reached at [kklott@adn.com](mailto:kklott@adn.com) or 257-4335.

---

All-time Fur Rondy victories

George Attla 10

Dr. Roland Lombard 8

Charlie Champaigne 4

Egil Ellis 4

• [Printer version](#)



E-mail  
this story

Copyright © 2005 The Anchorage Daily News